



# Past and present, day by day: Communication with former romantic partners, relationship-contingent self-esteem, and current relationship outcomes



Lindsey M. Rodriguez<sup>a,\*</sup>, Robert E. Wickham<sup>b</sup>, Camilla S. Øverup<sup>c</sup>, Amber B. Amspoker<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Psychology, University of South Florida – St. Petersburg, St. Petersburg, FL 33703, United States

<sup>b</sup> Department of Psychology, Palo Alto University, United States

<sup>c</sup> School of Psychology, Fairleigh Dickinson University, Teaneck, NJ 07666, United States

<sup>d</sup> Baylor College of Medicine, Houston, TX 77054, United States

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 9 May 2016

Revised 24 September 2016

Accepted 27 September 2016

Available online 8 October 2016

### Keywords:

Ex-partners

Romantic relationships

Diary

Satisfaction

## ABSTRACT

In an effort to illuminate factors delineating when communication with former romantic partners can be beneficial versus detrimental, this work examines how communication affects both the current and former relationships, and whether these associations vary as a function of one's self-worth being tied to the relationship (i.e., relationship-contingent self-esteem, RCSE). Over three weeks, undergraduates in relationships who regularly communicated with a former partner ( $N = 46$ ) completed nightly measures of former partner communication and satisfaction with current and former relationships. Results indicated that among those higher in RCSE, communication with former partners undermined current relationship satisfaction and bolstered former relationship satisfaction, patterns not evident among those lower in RCSE. For some, communication with former partners can be problematic for the current relationship.

© 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

## 1. Communication with former relationship partners

The presence of close relationships are incredibly important for physical and psychological health (e.g., Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010; Umberson, Crosnoe, & Reczek, 2010). While people have many long-lasting relationships, many eventually end. For some, this end signifies a significant loss of a part of oneself, in addition to the loss of a significant other (Lewandowski & Sahner, 2005). For this reason—among others (Rodriguez, Øverup, Wickham, Knee, & Bush, 2016)—some people continue to communicate with former partners, even after initiating a new romantic relationship. Especially among emerging adults (aged 18–26), communication with former partners is relatively common, with prevalence rates ranging from 40% to 67% (Kellas, Bean, Cunningham, & Cheng, 2008; Schneider & Kenny, 2000), even among those in new romantic relationships (Rodriguez et al., 2016).

However, such communication may not be without consequences, both for the individual and the new relationship. For

instance, research has shown communication with former partners is associated with higher psychological distress (Mason, Sbarra, Bryan, & Lee, 2012; Sbarra & Emery, 2005; cf. Masheter, 1991). While some research has examined intra-personal consequences of communication with former partners, there is little research on interpersonal consequences. A recent longitudinal study examining how communication with former partners affects current relationships found that when individuals continue to long for a former partner, they report poorer current relationship quality (and vice versa; Spielmann, Joel, MacDonald, & Kogan, 2013). Rodriguez et al. (2016) compared relationship commitment among those in relationships who continued to communicate with former partners with those who did not. Results showed that those who communicated with former partners were less committed to their current relationship; moreover, as frequency of communication increased, satisfaction with and commitment to the current relationship decreased.

No research has examined whether communication with former partners has implications for the day-to-day evaluation of one's current relationship. It may be that individuals are less satisfied with their current relationship on days when they communicate with a former partner, as communication may impart memories of past experiences. Further, such communication may also leave individuals happier with the relationship with their

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [Lindsey.rodriguez1@gmail.com](mailto:Lindsey.rodriguez1@gmail.com) (L.M. Rodriguez), [rwickham@palloalto.edu](mailto:rwickham@palloalto.edu) (R.E. Wickham), [coverup@fdu.edu](mailto:coverup@fdu.edu) (C.S. Øverup), [amspoker@bcm.edu](mailto:amspoker@bcm.edu) (A.B. Amspoker).

former partner if resulting in a heightened sense of connection and acceptance. Additionally, there is a gap in the literature for what types of individuals these associations might vary. Perhaps for some individuals, communication with former partners is unrelated to current relationship outcomes, but perhaps there are others wherein communication with former partners is strongly associated with changes in perceptions of the current relationship. In this research, we suggest that one particularly relevant individual difference is the extent to which one's sense of self-worth is derived from romantic relationships, relationship-contingent self-esteem.

### 1.1. Relationship-contingent self-esteem (RCSE)

Relationship-contingent self-esteem (RCSE) is an unhealthy form of self-esteem wherein a person's self-regard is dependent on the current status of their relationship (Knee, Canevello, Bush, & Cook, 2008). In this way, to someone who is higher in RCSE, even minor positive or negative relationship events can become significant because of their implications for self-worth. Events that affect or transpire within the relationship are interpreted as representing something about the quality of the self.

Previous research has found that those higher in RCSE had greater fluctuations in self-esteem following daily events in their current relationship (Knee et al., 2008; Studies 2 and 3). Specifically, negative relationship events (relative to positive events) were associated with lower self-esteem after the event, primarily for those higher in RCSE. These findings suggest that being higher in RCSE is associated with being more sensitive to relationship events. Although RCSE is conceptually similar to attachment anxiety in that both constructs represent a fixation and preoccupation with the relationship, RCSE uniquely predicts responses to relationship events beyond attachment anxiety (Knee et al., 2008).

We believe RCSE plays a particularly influential role in delineating when communication with former partners is helpful, harmful, or unrelated to current relationship well-being because for these individuals, communicating with former romantic partners may carry different implications for the self than when communicating with platonic friends. For those higher in RCSE, to the extent that they perceive communication with the former partner as having implications for the self—likely that positive interactions buffer self-esteem—this communication might elicit a sense of social comparison that undermines their current relationship. Alternatively, among those higher in RCSE, communicating with former partners may be utilized as a way of achieving validation and feelings of acceptance, at the price of (again) undermining their current relationship. Thus, we believe that communication with a former partner may be associated with poorer current relationship satisfaction for those high in RCSE. We also believe communication with the former partner will have implications on that relationship. For high RCSE individuals, communication with a former partner may fulfill their needs for relatedness and belonging, which are known to have positive effects for relationship satisfaction (Hadden, Smith, & Knee, 2014).

RCSE is moderately associated with attachment anxiety (Knee et al., 2008). Although both constructs theoretically measure hypervigilance to relationship events, the motivations underlying this hypervigilance are different. Rather than focusing on activation of working models—as is the focus of attachment theory—RCSE places focus on the implications of current relationship events for the person's self-worth. In the domain of communication with former partners, the theory would suggest that among those higher in RCSE, communication with former partners should provide the validation needed for boosts in one's self-worth, resulting in increases in satisfaction with former partners and decreases in satisfaction with current partners. Indeed, previous work has

found that associations between RCSE and relationship constructs remained significant when covarying attachment anxiety and trait self-esteem (Knee et al., 2008). Thus, we expect findings to emerge after controlling for anxious and avoidant attachment.

### 1.2. Current study

Among those in relationships, communication with former partners is a complex dyadic process, further complicated by factors related to the individuals involved (e.g., RCSE) as well as specific aspects of the relationship. To address the gap in the literature around how daily communication with former partners affects current relationship outcomes, we collected daily diary data from individuals in relationships who still communicated with a former partner on a regular basis. We expected that individuals would report poorer current relationship outcomes on days when they communicate with a former partner, and that this would be especially true among those higher in RCSE. We also expected that people would report higher relationship satisfaction with their former relationship partner on days when they communicated with their former partner, and again we expected this to be especially true among those higher in RCSE. Due to the strict conceptual basis of the hypotheses, these findings were expected to emerge regardless of anxious and avoidant attachment orientations, the length of the current relationship, and the length of the former relationship.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Forty-nine undergraduate students who were in current relationships and who also maintained regular (i.e., at least once per month) contact with a former romantic partner were recruited from the Psychology department at a large university in the south-central United States. Three participants provided incomplete responses to the baseline measures and were not included in the remaining analysis. The remaining 46 participants (84.8% female, 13.0% male, 2.2% unidentified) were on average, 21.7 years old ( $SD = 3.8$  years) and ethnically diverse, with 28% Asian, 24% Caucasian, 22% Hispanic/Latino, 13% African American, and 13% selecting "Other." An a priori power analysis was not conducted given the absence of previous studies on similar samples (i.e., individuals in relationships who still communicate with former partners) and similar research questions. The average length of participant's current relationship was 1.7 years ( $SD = 1.8$  years), and average length of the former romantic relationship was 1.5 years ( $SD = 1.3$  years). The majority of participants (61%) reported that they were not currently living with their current partner, and the remaining participants were either married (4%), co-habiting (13%), or reported other living arrangements (20%). Most participants indicated a high level of current relationship involvement, with only 7% describing their relationship as casual, whereas the remaining 93% categorizing their relationship as either exclusively dating, nearly engaged, engaged, or married.

### 2.2. Procedure

Participants who indicated interest in the study attended an in-lab orientation session where—after obtaining informed consent—they completed a baseline packet of self-report measures and were provided with an orientation to the daily diary portion of the study. The baseline packet gathered basic demographic information, along with measures assessing aspects of current and former relationships. Participants chose their most recent former partner of at least three months with whom they communicated to think about

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5046260>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5046260>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)